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Lyall Goldstein:

But let's get started. I'm Lyall Goldstein. I'm Director of the China Initiative here at the Watson Institute, and I want to give a warm welcome to everyone. This is really our last event of the season. I'm pleased to start on time, and I think we're going to try to end on time as well.

But it's my great pleasure to welcome my friend and senior mentor, Ambassador Chas Freeman. He's had a major impact on this institution, on the Watson School, that we're extremely thankful for. He has served in numerous roles—served his country in government as ambassador, as Assistant Secretary of Defense, as Assistant Secretary of State—I could go on and on and on.

In that regard, he's also played a major role in the search for peace around the entire globe: in the Middle East, in Africa, in Eastern Europe—even—it's really extraordinary. But in the China field, as you all know, he has really legendary status. And I'm going to say he has done more than anyone—anyone—to promote positive, peaceful, pragmatic relations and friendship between the US and China—again playing so many roles. I think as Director for Chinese Affairs at the State Department, and my personal favorite and not least, as principal interpreter for the pathbreaking Nixon visit.

So please join me in welcoming Chas Freeman here to China. Thank you very much.

Chas Freeman:

I wish I could live up to that introduction.

Well, it's human to imagine that change lays bare the ambitions of those who benefit from it. China has successfully returned to wealth and power, but there is little evidence that in doing so the Chinese have sought anything other than their own enrichment, international respect, national unity, and reassurance against renewed subjugation by foreigners.

We Americans nonetheless fear our eclipse by China. Our fears are aggravated—augmented—by our lapse into xenophobia and authoritarianism. As Hannah Arendt so presciently explained, authoritarians arise when economic, social, political, or religious change makes members of a formerly powerful group feel as though they've been left behind. Their frustration makes them vulnerable to leaders who promise to make them dominant or great again. A strongman downplays the real conditions that have created their problems and tells them that the only reason they have been dispossessed is that enemies have cheated them of power.

Hannah Arendt.

Americans attribute to China an aggressive desire to replace us as the global hegemon. This conjecture may or may not have any basis other than neurosis born of fears of lost supremacy. It really doesn't matter. We Americans once insisted, as the Chinese do now, that we would never emulate Great Britain's dominance of world affairs. Then we did.

At present, the Chinese shrink from replacing us in leading the causes and institutions we've ceased to lead or have outright abandoned—like climate change, official development assistance, setting the rules for international trade and investment, or countering nuclear proliferation. But like us, the Chinese will surely have regional and global leadership thrust upon them.

We cannot know whether they will eventually follow us into our current experimentation with global despotism.

China's new global prominence reflects its ongoing national rejuvenation and the reality that China—once again—accounts for more than one-third of everything humanity produces in purchasing power terms. China's economy is now much larger than ours, and in nominal terms it is the greatest driver of global growth.

China's become the largest source of financial and material support for the economic development of poorer nations. China is the world's largest trading nation. It is destined to become the world's biggest market for imported goods, supplanting the United States in that role.

China is a civilizational state with what is possibly the most entrepreneurial population on the planet and the world's largest community of scientists and engineers. American efforts to stifle Chinese innovation have instead galvanized it. China now leads the world in the production of intellectual property and innovation in almost every field of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

And China's increasing dominance of key consumer, industrial, and energy technologies enables it to set global standards for them.

The United States is severing or attenuating ties to international institutions and other countries, while China is strengthening them. China now is the world's largest and most widespread diplomatic presence abroad. It's also the most prominent member of new institutions that complement and expand the purposes and programs of those the United States sponsored after World War II.

By contrast, we Americans have chosen to oppose reform in legacy institutions and to exclude ourselves from the new ones.

China tries hard to be inoffensive. Beijing practices what I call strategic neutrality. It keeps its commitments limited, its ideology both idiosyncratic and vague, and its ambitions restrained. It makes itself available as a conciliator but avoids entangling itself in foreign quarrels. It does not seek to impose its political system or ideas on others.

As the United States gains a reputation for bullying behavior, double standards, and indifference to claims against humanity, China is self-consciously—and somewhat improbably—emerging as a global moral leader.

The United States has chosen to treat China's rise as a national security threat rather than as an opportunity to benefit from global economic and technological advance. So we've launched economic warfare against China and invested heavily in its military containment.

This stance is intended to sustain American military primacy in Pacific Asia by preventing the People's Liberation Army—or PLA—from conquering Taiwan, thereby completing its victory in the unfinished Chinese civil war. Empathy for Taiwan as a robust—and newly robust—Chinese democracy, ironically now considerably more devoted to the rule of law than we Americans are, reinforces this stance.

But the principal result of our policies has been to stimulate Beijing to modernize the PLA and to expand its nuclear arsenal so that it can prevail in a war with us if we again intervene to perpetuate Taiwan's separation from the rest of China.

We've declared China to be our pacing threat. Nonetheless, what we're doing to compete with China and other rising and resurgent powers is more self-debilitating than invigorating, and more rhetorical than real.

We are in the midst of a Great Leap Backward—or Cultural Revolution–style—assault on the domestic institutions that made America great: the rule of law, freedom of speech, academic freedom and scientific excellence, federal partnerships with research universities, openness to foreigners and their ideas, policies based on evidence and

expertise rather than fake news and unsubstantiated prejudice, and the prioritization of objectivity over political correctness.

We have abandoned reliance on diplomacy as a means of threat reduction or an alternative to economic and military warfare that can achieve adjustments in our relations with other nations or groups of nations.

More compelling interests overwhelmed our much-vaunted pivot or rebalance to Pacific Asia, and it never took place. Our armed forces remain pinned down in other regions. We have made only minor adjustments to our alliance relationships even as we alienate former partners and friends.

Meanwhile, the balance of naval and air power on China's periphery has turned against us.

In the absence of a strategy implemented and backed by diplomacy, huge increases in our so-called War Department's budget will not persuade China not to do what it feels it must do in its region.

Rather than increasing our political and economic involvement in Pacific Asia, we have absented ourselves from its councils. We skip or make only cameo appearances at most of its gatherings. We've adopted visa and other policies that discourage Asians from studying, working, or investing in our country.

Strategic abdication and self-isolation are not effective responses to shifting balances of regional and global power.

The Biden administration's effort to replace the United Nations Charter and international law with the so-called rules-based order dictated by the United States and other members of the G7 utterly failed to gain traction. Instead of buttressing the global leadership of the West, we Americans discredited our pretensions to exemplify a civilization entitled to impose its allegedly superior values on others.

Consider our abandonment of the rule of law and endorsement of indefinite detention without charge both at home and abroad; our participation in kidnapping, torture, and regime-change operations; our egregious application of double standards in our stand on foreign wars; our turn from enablement to active participation in Israel's mass murder, starvation, denial of medical care, assassination of journalists, and other war crimes; our indifference to cruel and unusual punishment including torture, sodomy, and rape; our politically vindictive suppression of dissenting opinions; and our abandonment of constitutional democracy in favor of what Latin Americans call "caudillismo"—a term for authoritarianism characterized by a personality cult.

We have ceased to offer others access to our market, provide foreign assistance, or build institutions to meet challenges to regional and global interests. The legacy institutions we originally created lack the capacity to address. We've withdrawn from or are sabotaging the institutions we created to promote and regulate global commerce and cooperation, substituting for them unilateral American attempts to exercise dominance coercively through economic warfare, punitive tariffs and sanctions, extortion, the operation of a protection racket involving the expropriation of foreign real estate and resources, and the lawless use of force.

We are now seen as cruel and profiteering rather than caring.

At home, the United States is adopting a novel form of state capitalism with American characteristics. This grifter-directed economic order is a parody of our distorted understanding of the Chinese system. It's based on political payoffs, the protection of vested industrial interests, subsidies to offset the damage done by deleterious policies, and the rake-off of private profit from government activities by a privileged class of bureaucrats.

Among other things, our version of state capitalism entails disregarding conflicts of interest to enable private enrichment at government expense, subsidizing uncompetitive economic sectors and protecting them from foreign competition, disinvesting in education, scientific research, and government services, curtailing investment in new technologies like electric vehicles, wind, and solar power to make the US safe for coal, gas, oil, and the internal combustion engine, snatching partial government control of key industries by extorting equity shares from them in

return for policy favors, relying on credit rollovers rather than tax revenue to finance unprecedented levels of government debt.

The world economy no longer revolves around the volatile, contracting, and increasingly inaccessible American market. It is fragmenting into multiple regional trade and investment regimes whose only common characteristics are, first, their exclusion of the United States and, second, their commitment to restoring and enhancing the open trading regime once embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Smaller economies are shifting toward reliance on larger ones that can guarantee trade and investment. Sadly, the United States is no longer a dependable source of either.

America also no longer leads most fields of science and technology. Recent polls suggest that as many as three out of four scientists in our country—both native- and foreign-born—have considered or are considering immigration. We are making the United States an ever smaller yard with an ever higher fence.

Exporting scientific talent is a damaging blow to our ability to compete with China or other rising or resurgent powers. This is political self-mutilation resembling what happened when ultraist xenophobia took hold in Germany in the 1930s. As Germans forfeited their global leadership in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the United States absorbed that role. We are now following the German example by driving our most inventive STEM workers to greener pastures. Increasingly, these are in China.

In the last half of the 20th century, Americans were the primary guarantors of international law and of other nations' security. We should take pride in that. But in the third decade of the 21st century, others see us as the most powerful threat to both international law and their security.

Other nations that once felt safe in the Pax Americana now feel obliged to protect themselves against an America that they view as bellicose not benign, selfish not generous, cruel not compassionate, inhospitable not welcoming, and inimical not companionable.

In short, we Americans are well along in our withdrawal from the world order we once championed and helped establish. Our country is becoming an ever smaller participant in global decision-making, supply chains, trade, value added, investment, and a world economy no longer dominated by the West.

We prioritize the gratification of our political elite over strategic calculation, propelling other nations—including those in our own hemisphere—toward China and other great powers able to fill the void created by our retreat from globalization and our retirement from constructive involvement and participation in world affairs.

China's increasing influence must be seen in this context. China's new prominence is not a measure of threatening Chinese ambition but the inevitable consequence of our retreat from leadership and our alienation of other nations.

But to the regret of much of the world, China is not moving to occupy the leadership void we are creating. An authoritarian, caprice-based order is no substitute for one based on the predictable foundation of international law. Ego-driven petulance is no substitute for strategy. Protection rackets and cronyism are no substitute for diplomacy. Intemperate insults do not provoke partnership. Disregard for the sovereignty of others enrages them and disincentivizes their cooperation.

It's generally considered wise to divide, not unite, one's adversaries. We have done the opposite. China and other rising powers are well aware that they owe their prosperity to their embrace of the international system created by the consensus of the United States and other capitalist powerhouses.

The BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization do not want to set that system aside. To the contrary, they seek its reinstatement—free from American dominance and empowered to address neglected global challenges through consensus-driven incremental change.

They are groping for ways to restore or reinvent the beneficial consensus-based rules that America led the world in creating and has since demolished.

If the WTO—the World Trade Organization—cannot be rescued from US sabotage of it, its market and dispute-resolution functions must be recreated in sub-global form.

The challenge is to create substitutes for the growing number of institutions the United States now shuns or blocks. Doing so will require resorting to ad hoc conferences and gatherings to address planet-wide issues that the United States officially denies exist and won't allow international organizations to address.

It demands developing trade-settlement mechanisms that flank the increasingly weaponized US dollar. It suggests looking for ways to preserve value that reduce reliance on the dollar as a reserve currency. It means forming new defensive coalitions and alliances to make up for the lost protection of international law and the transformation of the United States from military protector to uninhibited predator.

Meet the proposed new world order: same as the old one, but under new pluralistic management and regulated by new institutions.

America has turned its back on globalization, but the world beyond the transatlantic community continues to globalize.

American strategy has always aimed at preventing the rise of a Eurasian hegemon that might menace our global primacy. But our confrontations with China and Russia have pushed them into a close embrace, to which other US policies have now added Iran and North Korea.

This unnatural grouping—China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia—has nothing in common beyond its discordant members' enmity to US dictation.

Current US policy statements and actions are bringing into being the very Eurasian counterweight to our power that we have traditionally sought to preclude.

Three months ago today, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Tianjin, the leaders of three of the four major power centers on the Eurasian landmass—China, India, and Russia—joined in a defiant response to American unilateralism. The gathering was attended by Iran, all Central Asian countries, and almost all Southeast Asian countries. Only Arab states other than Egypt—and Europe—were missing.

Once the home of the world's colonial overlords, Europe is now the sick man of Eurasia. The European Union lacks the institutional capabilities, unified resolve, and steadfastness needed to pursue either strategic or tactical objectives effectively. It has many of the attributes of a geoeconomic superpower but seems determined to remain less than the sum of its parts and thus politically impotent.

Having invented modern statecraft, Europe has forgotten how to practice it.

Europe's malaise and declining competitiveness will not be restored by the weird combination of austerity, rearmament, and embargo of Russian natural resources. Most of its governments have adopted no coherent response to deteriorating transatlantic relations, Russian advances in Ukraine, energy insecurity, China's increasing technological prowess, or the emergence of a world order no longer centered on the West.

In short, Europe is adrift. No one can now confidently predict Europe's future geoeconomic role or geopolitical orientation.

The other major absentee at the Tianjin gathering was Japan, whose defeat in World War II was celebrated two days later in a grand military parade in Beijing. For its own reasons, India did not attend that parade, but Japan's efforts to persuade other Asians not to do so failed.

The military might on display succeeded in demonstrating a convincing ability by China to defend itself against the United States.

If Americans contrive a bloody rendezvous with Chinese nationalism—something we increasingly risk, as does Japan—the United States is 7,000 miles away from the East and South China Seas. Distance attenuates power. Great distance attenuates it greatly.

Together, the SCO meeting at Tianjin and the Beijing parade raise unwelcome questions:

How long should Americans expect to retain the political-military dominance we have enjoyed in Pacific Asia since the defeat of Japan 80 years ago?

Beyond that increasingly ripe conundrum: What is our strategic view and focus? To what extent does our view of Japan's role in Pacific Asia or the Indo-Pacific coincide with Japanese aspirations? Must we follow Japan's recent threat to extend its defense perimeter to include Taiwan? Do we manage that?

Can we move India—a resolutely independent player on the geopolitical chessboard—if so, where and how?

What if Pakistan—and its apparent extension of nuclear deterrence to Saudi Arabia—against our nuclear-armed Israeli client state?

Can we extricate ourselves from the moral turpitude and alienation of the global majority that complicity with Israel in genocide has entailed?

Will Latin America accept a return to lawless US overlordship of the sort that we seem to be pursuing?

How do we propose to deal with the countries of Africa as they rise in demographic and economic weight in association with China?

Arab states, Brazil, India, Russia, Turkey, and other resurgent powers—are we capable of minding our own affairs? Is building barriers to cooperation with other countries a feasible way to do that?

All these issues impinge on our relationship with China for the simple reason that, for the first time in its long history, China is a world power—that is, a nation whose economic, political, and other interests and policies must be considered everywhere on the planet as ours must be anywhere.

If we appear to push other countries around, they will seek to enlist China in opposition to us. China will not necessarily accept such invitations—as its cautious policies in West Asia and the Western Hemisphere suggest—but we cannot rule this out.

After all, we are currently engaged in a strange version of self-containment: retreating politically and economically while uniting allies, friends, and foes against us.

Our media curate reality rather than reporting it. Our government is systematically stripping itself of expertise and competence. While other governments are willing to talk to us, they no longer follow our lead or replicate our policies in their relations with other countries.

We may inadvertently be creating a world divided between the United States and a few vassal states and a global coalition—or sphere of influence—animated by aversion to our selfishness and bullying behavior and aligning against us with China.

At the Sino-American summit in Busan, our president acted as though he understood that we can neither out-compete China nor win a war with it. China has learned how to use export controls, sanctions, boycotts, and embargoes from us to put pressure on countries that challenge it.

Will it wield its growing strength as unilaterally as we have done? As our power diminishes, will it emulate our new disdain for international comity?

Is the West up to countering a China behaving like we do?

Western international prestige and privilege have been overtaken by events, and the West as we've known it since the 1940s is moribund. It still has three permanent members to cast vetoes in the UN Security Council, but it lacks both the cohesion and the authority to control the direction of world events.

No. China has many problems, but most of them do not conform to those that career anti-China polemicists have predicted. China shows no sign of collapse. It is not growing old before it grows rich. It is instead growing rich through automation and offshoring those labor-intensive industries that cannot be manned by robots.

Negative population growth plus steady economic growth and gains in productivity foretell considerably higher per capita incomes for the Chinese people.

Most Chinese do not share our distaste for their political system. Unlike us, China is not at war with other countries. It may yet be able to conclude its civil war through shows of force—assimilating Taiwan by making the island an offer it cannot refuse rather than through outright warfare.

We better hope so. Our current mindless drive toward war with China over Taiwan can only end in tragedy for all concerned, including Taiwan.

It is of course not inevitable that China's progress toward greater affluence and global leadership will continue without interruption. Many things have gone wrong for China in the past. Much could go wrong for it again. But hoping that China will suffer unanticipated setbacks is not a strategy.

The fact is that the United States does not have a plan for dealing with the most probable scenario before us: a world in which China has returned to the preeminence of past millennia. We need to conceptualize one.

This means we must nurture a realistic understanding of China and the Chinese—not engage in spurious reasoning by analogy. China does not seek to conquer or breach the sovereignty of its neighbors. It is not engaged in a search for Lebensraum or foreign colonies. It has no theory of manifest destiny. Its Warring States period—in which it resembled Europe or India in the viciousness of its internal rivalries—is long past.

It is unlikely to follow either our path or that of other civilizations.

Tragically, whatever the source of our current approach to managing China may be, it is not expertise. We are now led by China hawks who've never been to China or studied it but who are convinced they know everything they need to know about it.

Our president's first and only visit to China was as president—in the security cocoon and perceptual bubble that presidential visits entail. Neither our Secretary of State—who was in fact sanctioned by China, denied entry to China for his vituperative comments about it—nor our so-called Secretary of War have ever been to China.

The architect of the administration's trade and investment war on China, Peter Navarro—sometimes known as Ron Vara—with whom he conducted an active dialogue, made his career with decades of China-bashing but had his first and only visit to China in 2018. He's not been back.

The small army of China hands that used to populate our diplomatic and intelligence services has been decimated. Those who remain have no real input into China policy anyway.

In any event, there is no coherent policy process in today's Washington in which their expertise might play a part.

The last quarter century—I hate to remind us—has seen an unbroken series of defeats, disappointments, and political and economic crises for our country: most recently the scuttle from Afghanistan, the failure of our proxy war in Ukraine, our engagement in the genocide in Palestine, a forever war on behalf of Israel with Iran, dysfunctional policies that have made North Korea a nuclear threat to our cities, an escalating confrontation with Venezuela and its neighbors.

We are engaged in combat with so-called terrorist forces in at least 82 countries. But instead of learning from this sorry record, the United States has adopted an approach to international relations that combines the belief that the right combination of pressures can always bring foreign nations to heel, personal chemistry can overcome conflicting national interests, and military action should precede diplomacy rather than back it.

Our leaders habitually avoid the hard political choices that statecraft demands while throwing money, sanctions, weapons, and soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines at problems. They like flashy signing ceremonies—pseudo-events that celebrate their resolution of problems they have not in any way resolved.

We cannot afford to apply this self-indulgent methodology to China, which is destined to play a role at least equal to ours in world affairs.

We must be realistic. We had better come up with a way to coexist with the Chinese, leverage their rising prosperity and technological competence to our own benefit, and reduce the point danger of pointless confrontation with them. Such confrontation promises to be catastrophic for us as well as for them.

To conclude: our current China policy is as ruinous as our repudiation of the world order we played the major role in creating is. It cannot and must not be sustained. We need to rethink this.

Thank you. I apologize for not saying what I mean, but I think—

Lyall Goldstein:

Okay. Thank you. I'm reassured to see this room as full as I thought it should be, and that's a wonderful tribute to the man next to me and his incredible career and wisdom.

So let's have some questions. But may I suggest that these be quite succinct so that we can get around, and I will try to tabulate who is waiting and so that I can get around to a lot of people.

Yes, sir in the front row.

Audience Member 1:

Do I have to be succinct?

Lyall Goldstein:

No.

Audience Member 1:

As you paint a pretty bleak picture and you trace the decline of the United States back at least a quarter of a century, however it's only been in the last year that the real damage has been done. And my question is—if—and it's a big if—a more reasonable administration comes into power in 2026 and 2028, is it possible—not for us to regain the hegemony that we had—but at least to start cooperating and start undoing the damage that the current administration has done?

Chas Freeman:

I wouldn't blame this all on the current administration. I know that the Biden administration suspended adherence to international law in favor of what they called the rules-based order, and that it was they who got us into the war in Ukraine, and it was they who tolerated the beginning of the genocide in Gaza.

So I think this has been a progressive phenomenon. After all, it was President Obama who killed two American citizens in Yemen with no due process. We've seen a deterioration in our standard of culture, civilization, adherence to the Constitution.

Having said all that, of course we can reform and repent. And I am reminded of a Chinese theory of historiography—I don't believe in theories generally, but this is worth citing—that the dynastic cycle in China, meaning the oscillation between constitutional orders (a dynasty being a constitutional order), suggests that dynasties can have a lifespan of about 225 to 250 years.

At which point in the Chinese experience one of three things happens: there's an internal rebellion—generally rural in nature because of Chinese society—by the farmers; the dynasty is overthrown; a foreign invader comes—the Qing, Manchus, or the Mongols—and overthrows the dynasty and China is then ruled by foreigners; or occasionally, as in the case of the Han, the dynasty picks itself up and—while it can't regain a golden age—it has a silver age.

We're 249 years into our independence.

Okay, let's get another question.

Lyall Goldstein:

Professor Head here—Jim Head, planetary geology at Brown.

Audience Member 2 (Jim Head):

Ambassador Freeman, when the Chinese land humans on the moon before 2030—well before the United States—will what do you think the effect will be on the United States and world perception?

Chas Freeman:

Well, I would like to think that it would galvanize us as Sputnik did. But I'm not sure. A lot of people seem to believe that scientific exploration is something we no longer need to do.

And the Chinese space program, by the way, is interestingly—it's fundamentally modeled on Gerard O'Neill's—what was that called?—something frontier—I frontier. This is—he was a Princeton professor back in the 1970s—and he devised a scheme. And I actually talked to the Chinese space leadership about this and they're following exactly his path.

So you should—if you haven't read that book—do so. Basically it leads to the occupation of part of the moon, the use of rail guns to shoot material from the moon into the Lagrange points where gravity is equalized, the establishment—the building there—of power stations and factories in zero gravity, and the beaming back to Earth through microwaves of electric power.

That was O'Neill's idea. The technology of the time we could have done that. The technology of today we can do it a lot better. And that is what the Chinese are doing.

So every single thing that the Chinese have done in space—very impressively—has had a profit motive attached to it. They want to make money off space as they learn to deal with it.

Maybe we are approaching that now with Blue—you know, Elon Musk and company—certainly seeking for profit in high space.

But no, I think that—I don't know what our reaction will be, but we can see this coming, as you just suggested, Jim.

Lyall Goldstein:

Maybe I'll take the chairman's privilege here and ask a quick question. If you can amplify on how do we deal with the terrible enmity between China and Japan that is in the headlines every day now?

Chas Freeman:

Well, there is an ongoing confrontation. Those who hoped that it would immediately be papered over have proven to be mistaken.

What is the issue? The issue is of course that Japan from 1895 to 1945 had annexed Taiwan. It was part of Japan. It was very successfully assimilated to Japanese culture. And it was recovered under the Cairo and Potsdam declarations of World War II—which stated our war aims—recovered by the Republic of China (then capital Nanjing on the mainland) in 1945 with our help.

1949 the Republic of China—the remnant of it—fled to Taiwan.

What the Chinese have just done is very interesting. Xi Jinping in his latest pronouncement on this subject said that the recovery of Taiwan for China was a major result of World War II and an integral part of the post-war order.

In other words, he has now pictured Japan as revisionist because Prime Minister Takaichi—in a—I think a slip—she's an experienced politician; she should know better than to answer a hypothetical question—did answer a hypothetical question in the Diet by suggesting that Taiwan was now once again part of Japan for defense purposes.

And this of course would embolden people in Taiwan to continue to pursue independence rather than reassociation with the rest of China. And therefore it is a strategic change of some significance.

But—and therefore the Chinese have not given up. But I note finally on a note of hope that—well, there have been incidents in China—for example, Japanese singer pulled from the stage in the middle of a concert; concert cancelled with no prior notice; one singer at a concert appearing in an empty concert hall where no Chinese who had bought tickets attended.

This is being widely criticized by Chinese netizens—commentators on the internet—as excessive and uncivilized. And I think there's an effort to reel back some of the more egregious anger that Madame Takaichi has evoked.

Lyall Goldstein:

Okay, great. I'll remind people to be concise. We'll try to get around to a few more questions. And make sure to raise your hand so I can see it.

Somebody in the back—sir—apologies, sir. Oh yes, of course.

Audience Member 3 (Army/Navy Fellows):

Thank you very much for coming to speak with us. So we have a joint question here from the Army and Navy fellows of the Watson School—I didn't know you guys got along.

December 12th we won't, but that's okay.

Right—yeah, Army-Navy game is next weekend.

Yeah, I thought so.

Sir, we were just wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you think that the Departments of Defense and State might be able to work a little bit together in the future towards the type of policy that you said that you'd like to see the US adopt towards China and the Asia-Pacific region.

Chas Freeman:

There is a prerequisite for that, which is the restoration of the interagency policy process, which essentially has been destroyed.

Marco Rubio is simultaneously Secretary of State, National Security Adviser, the National Archivist, and the Director of what remains of USAID—and he can't do any of those jobs at all.

He is—well—he's not in Moscow today. We have two business cronies—well, one is the son-in-law of the president—representing us in discussions with Vladimir Putin, who the last time I looked was not a pushover.

And where is Marco Rubio? I don't know—maybe bombing Venezuela.

So the prerequisite is the restoration of an orderly policy process. That requires a reconstitution of the National Security Council and frankly it requires a president who's willing to listen to policy advice rather than react with his gut.

You know, he may be right sometimes, but it's not a studied process by which we make policy.

A second problem is this: the Pentagon—although as I joked with you before the session, you know, had to be—it's about to be torn down because acronyms cause cancer—the Pentagon is intact. The State Department has been almost obliterated.

There is no value placed on professional diplomacy. I would argue as a Foreign Service officer of 30 years of service that we were never as good as we should have been, but we could have been more professional.

I like very much the habit you have in the military of hotwashes—after-action reports—scrubs: what went right, what went wrong, why did it go right, how could we do this better. Diplomats never learned that very healthy habit.

So I would like to see the Department of State rebuilt along rather new lines and the diplomatic service more professional.

But at the moment we are just about to send an ambassador to Singapore who emulates one of his predecessors. When Lee Kuan Yew—one of the wisest statesmen in the world—casually mentioned something about the two Koreas, our ambassador's response was: "There are two Koreas? Why?"

You know, you can't make this stuff up.

Lyall Goldstein:

William Tompkins—graduated in international relations at the University of London.

Audience Member 4 (William Tompkins):

A couple weeks ago Condoleezza Rice was at Brown University where she made reference to "transformative diplomacy" as she called it—which was the US using economic leverage to push for social change in both developed and developing world countries.

And this has become a theme with some of the revisionist—or reemerging—world powers, particularly Russia, with President Vladimir Putin making pretty frequent references to LGBT ideology etc.

How much does this play into—in addition to US economic and military decline as well as US diplomatic blunders—how much does that play into angering various countries around the planet?

Chas Freeman:

Well, I call what Condi Rice described the "missionary position." And it implies a sort of dominance—and I won't get into the rest of it.

But frankly, I described what the Chinese are doing. I think they're doing the right thing, and it actually has ancient roots.

Mencius—a Confucian thinker—said very correctly, and Americans for a long time understood this, that the best way to exercise influence abroad is to set a good example. If you set a good example, people will want to emulate you and therefore you have influence.

That is a very healthy kind.

So I don't believe in the missionary position. I think foreplay is important.

But I think we should probably leave it there.

Unfortunately, if we take the opposite position and decide that we have the divine right to impose our values on the world, what that leads to is things like regime-change operations. And those don't work.

I don't know of a single case where we have intervened in that manner where the consequences have not been dire—not only for the country concerned, the target, but for us.

Think of the overthrow of the democracy in Iran, for example, and its consequences. Think of what we've done in Guatemala. Might think about the election in Honduras yesterday—or Sunday, I guess anyway—still it's still undecided, I believe.

So I would favor moral restraint and a focus on getting our own act together.

Lyall Goldstein:

This gentleman in the corner.

Audience Member 5:

I'll try to keep this short. I'm just some war gamer from Red Allen College, but I know a few things about China. I've heard stuff about death vans, organ harvesting, bringing back slave labor to harvest cotton in Urumqi, and a bunch of other things—much of which is polemical and unevidenced, all right.

But I think there has been some organ harvesting. But my question is—I think the military man here can affirm—Taiwan is a US ally, and China also has some interest in other islands that Japan has.

Do you—are you suggesting that we let our ally be taken over by force or not do anything about it? I just want to clarify that. Thank you.

Chas Freeman:

Well, thank you.

First of all, Taiwan is not an ally. It has no commitment to do anything at all for the United States. It is protected by the United States for various rather murky reasons—some of them ideological, as I mentioned.

Taiwan is a robust democracy with a high standard of civil liberties and a greater respect now for the rule of law than we have.

In the past it was our means of containing the rest of China. It doesn't serve that purpose now.

So I would be very careful about terminology.

And the islands that you refer to—the Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu—are between Okinawa and the China mainland, and they have been always a no man's land.

And here I want to digress a little bit, if I may. The concept of sovereignty that the West developed had to do with maps and geography, not people.

So an island that was uninhabited could be claimed as part of the United States or China or whatever or Japan.

The concept of sovereignty in East Asia up until the Meiji Restoration in Japan—when Japan adopted the Western standard—was people: did they have an allegiance to the government in Tokyo, let's say, or Beijing?

There are no people on the Senkaku Islands. There are goats—put there by Japanese rightists.

And my solution for the problem is that we should create a foundation for the protection of goats, and it should have Chinese and Japanese members of the board, and it should stipulate—do not want to be part of communist China—some do, some don't.

Sometimes—you know—I mean—let me just say this: most people in Taiwan do not want to be reunified with the rest of China. They have developed a separate identity.

But the only way you can achieve independence is through a war. We did that in 1776. We did not gain our independence until 1783 when the British grudgingly accepted that they had been defeated.

Sorry—1783.

Thank you—maybe we don't have it now, I don't know.

Lyall Goldstein:

Let's go to another question.

What do you think the effect will be of emerging powers such as India or Africa—particularly Nigeria—on this picture? Do you think that they'll just be part of this coalition against the United States, or will they have independent policies that might change the bigger picture?

Chas Freeman:

I prefer the word "multinodal" to "multipolar" because a pole is the end of a two-dimensional line, and a node is a three-dimensional object which you can connect many things to—thick things, thin things—and it can turn you because it is in three dimensions.

We are entering a multinodal world order.

Nigeria is a very important country. It will become more important, and it will follow policies that it believes are in the interest of Nigerians.

Although I have to admit I once dined with President Babangida over breakfast in the Dodan Barracks in Lagos, and he said to me: "Nigeria would be—or should be—a really great country. It's only got one problem." He said, "It's inhabited by Nigerians."

Which is quite a comment for the president of Nigeria to make.

But at any rate—no—it's going to become more important. Countries everywhere—one of the things that's happening is that medium powers—not just former great powers like Turkey, but countries like Saudi Arabia—are developing an independent role in global affairs.

And they're not subservient anymore to any foreign patron.

And we see countries like Indonesia—which is a potential great power—rising. Nigeria is a potential great power.

You're going to have two billion people in Africa at the end of this century if nothing fundamentally changes. That's going to be where the world's labor force is centered. Everybody else is diminishing in population.

So I think we're entering a world of much greater complexity.

Let me make another point. One other reason I prefer "multinodal" to "multipolar" is that people may have an economic policy that is directed one way and a political policy that's directed another.

Or they may have an entente—meaning a contingent commitment to something—a limited partnership for limited purposes, perhaps for a limited time—but not have an alliance.

They may be client states. They may have the patronage of someone for some purposes but not for others.

So I think we're entering a far more complex world. And it's nothing like the bipolar order of the Cold War, and it isn't going to be a G2 as President Trump hinted it might be at Busan.

And it's going to be a far more complex kaleidoscope.

And we need—this is one reason why, to go back to what needs to be done to be a little smarter in statecraft—we need to recover diplomatic agility. We're not engaged in the trench warfare of the Cold War anymore.

Lyall Goldstein:

So I think we have just time for one more question.

So Chas, the year 2027 is looming. And do you think that Xi Jinping is going to take action? And in particular, do you think they might institute a blockade of some sort—either economic or military?

Chas Freeman:

Well, I think Lyall has studied this question in more detail than I.

But briefly I would say: first of all, the Chinese—Xi Jinping included—absolutely do not want to go to war over Taiwan.

They want to make—they want to overawe Taiwan to the point where they can do what the Godfather did—maybe put a dead horsehead in Taiwan's bed.

They can make Taiwan an offer it can't refuse—in other words, convince Taiwan that its best course of action is a negotiated accommodation in which the mainland will make major compromises, and Taiwan may retain its separate status for an agreed period.

That's what they want.

They don't want to get into a war. They know that a war not only risks American involvement—which would not be a good idea, by the way.

There is a phrase in Chinese that summarizes their military doctrine: "If you don't strike me, I won't strike you. If you strike me, I'm going to strike back."

And you know, you can't have a limited war if you're striking the Chinese homeland. That is not how we conducted Korea and Vietnam where they were involved. We will get struck.

That's why they're building the big nuclear force they are—because they want to be able to have us understand that if we use nuclear weapons on them, we're going to suffer.

So this is not a war anybody should want. And I don't think the Chinese want it. I know people in Taiwan don't want it.

But the net effect of—back to that question of our policy—has been to enable Taiwan to avoid negotiation, which is in my view not wise.

I mean, if we really want a peaceful settlement of this—as we have consistently stated—how do you get a peaceful settlement? You talk.

You know, we don't—our policies at the moment are purely military deterrence. We don't have any other policies on the Taiwan issue.

We're not engaged in a dialogue on it with anybody—not Taiwan, not mainland.

So this is a major issue. We need to rethink.

And of course we should be considerate of Taiwan. People in Taiwan are our friends. They have been for a long time. We shouldn't sell them out.

We should be helpful to them. I don't think we're being helpful to them by setting them up when the only solution to the issue of Chinese nationalism is a war.

So I'd try to find a way around that.

Lyall Goldstein:

Well said. Well, please join me in—

Outstanding. Outstanding. Thank you everyone for coming today.

As you're filing out, I'll just let you know of a couple more events that we have on our calendar for the semester.

On Friday afternoon, Brown China Summit is putting on a panel, so you may want to try to get in on that.

And then next week we have a very exciting event that involves a bunch of student researchers. I think I saw Professor Dejing Lee here who's been running this fabulous effort.

So that is on next week—on Wednesday—Wednesday afternoon. So you'll want to be at that, which I think I can say for sure will be an outstanding event.

Thank you again for coming today, and I assure you I will do everything I can to get Chas Freeman back on the program for 2026.